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ABSTRACT

Studies on coping with life events identify marriage as a distinct situational stressor, in which a wide range of coping strategies specific to the marital relationship are employed. This study examined the process of martial adaptation, identified as a style of coping, in 116 married volunteers. Subjects completed a demographic questionnaire, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale to measure marital satisfaction, the Profile of Mood States to measure individual emotional states, the "L" Scale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory to examine the relationship of social desirability to questionnaire responses, and the Marital Coping Inventory to assess the process of marital adjustment. The 58-item Marital Coping Inventory was constructed, consisting of strategies that were generated empirically and also fit a theoretical model of coping. Factor analysis generated five subscales of the coping inventory, and each subscale demonstrated a distinct correlation with mood states and marital adjustment. Passive and emotional strategies corresponded to poor adjustment and high personal distress. Strategies that were positively related to adjustment were active and cognitive, and aimed at resolving the problem and alleviating the emotional aspects of the stressor. (NB)

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Assessing the process of marital adaptation: The Marital Coping Inventory.

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Abstract

The process of marital adaptation, identified as style of coping, was assessed in 116 married volunteers. A 58 item "Marital Coping Inventory" was constructed, consisting of strategies that were generated empirically and also fit a theoretical model of coping. Factor analysis generated five subscales of the coping inventory, and each subscale demonstrated a distinct correlation with mood states and marital adjustment. Passive and emotional strategies corresponded to poor adjustment and high personal distress. Strategies that were positively related to adjustment were active and cognitive, and aimed at resolving the problem and alleviating the emotional aspects of the stressor.

Introduction

Marital adjustment can best be understood as the final observable outcome of a couple's attempt to establish a stable and satisfying intimate relationship. Different theoretical models identify specific components in this process, including personal, contextual, and interpersonal issues. Psychodynamic theorists describe marital difficulties as manifestations of unresolved conflicts originating from childhood interpersonal experiences (Blanck & Blanck, 1968). Interpersonal models focus on the conditions of the present marital relationship, including the complementarity of the spouses' conscious and unconscious expectations of the marriage (Sager, 1976). Behavioral models examine the reciprocal patterns of rewards and punishments within the marital dyad (Jacobson, 1981). Any theoretical model implicitly assumes that couples are faced with the daily task of managing stressors and seeking pleasure and satisfaction within and outside the marriage in a context of needs which are unique to each individual.

The relationship between coping with life events and personal well-being has led to an abundance of theoretical and empirical formulations that identify and categorize the coping styles individuals may use. Coping strategies have been organized by their focus, reflecting efforts to either modify the meaning of the event ("cognitive"), change the source of distress ("problem

focused"), or to manage the affective response to a stressful event ("emotion focused") (Moos, Cronkite, Billings, & Finney, 1987; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). Coping items have also been categorized by their method, utilizing either active (cognitive or behavioral) or passive (avoidance) responses to a stressor (Moos, et.al., 1987). These categorizations have been used to evaluate the effectiveness of coping strategies in alleviating subjective distress. Although active strategies are generally found to be more effective, stressors of different life contexts require a unique style of coping in order to be managed most successfully.

Studies on coping with life events identify marriage as a distinct situational stressor, in which a wide range of coping strategies specific to the marital relationship are employed. At present, only a few reports have explored the nature of coping in marriage (Ilfeld, 1980, Menaghan, 1982; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The data in all these reports are based on extensive unstructured interviews from a single data base. In each study, coping strategies that are related to good marital adjustment include positive cognitive restructuring and negotiations with the spouse. Strategies related to poor adjustment include passive resignations, emotional discharge, avoidance, and seeking outside help. These findings are consistent with data on the effectiveness of coping with general life events, in that active coping is more effective than passive coping in alleviating distress.

Although the results reported in these studies are consistent with other research on coping, they did not use a measure of coping with demonstratable reliability and validity. The items were picked from a much larger sample of questions, and may have been unsystematically chosen and scored. Furthermore, their focus on general coping with life events precluded an examination of factors specific to the process of marital adaptation.

The present study was designed to address these methodological issues by developing a marital coping inventory that is psychometrically reliable and valid, and which incorporates a theoretical framework of both general coping theory and knowledge of marital dynamics.

Method

Subjects:

One-hundred and sixteen married volunteers were recruited either through peer nomination, marriage encounter groups, the waiting area of a medical clinic, or a dining area of a large corporate office building in New York City. Sixty-one of the participants were male and 53 were female. A majority of the subjects were White (47% White, 9% Black, 8% Asian); and most were Catholic (47% Catholic, 15% Protestant, 10% Jewish). Subjects had been married between 6 months and 34 years (with an average of 10 years).

Stages of Scale Development:

Previous research has identified three dichotomous dimensions of coping: emotion vs. problem focused, active vs. passive, and cognitive vs. behavioral. Because of the importance of balancing both intramarital and interpersonal needs within a marital relationship, two additional dimensions were added that focus specifically on the involvement of significant others: spouse related vs. spouse unrelated, and active others vs. inactive others. These two dimensions distinguish strategies that directly include the spouse (e.g., "try to remember how I dealt with a similar situation in the past" vs."try to figure out what would be best for both me and my husband/wife"), and those in which individuals outside the marriage serve an active role in the coping effort (e.g., "go over the situation in my mind to try to understand it" vs. "try to figure out what someone else in my situation would do").

The initial item pool included coping strategies described in previous research and strategies gleaned from unstructured interviews with married individuals. These items were categorized on the five theoretical dimensions described above with a goal of two items for each five-dimensional category. When more than two items fit a category, redundant items were dropped or modified so that all dimensional combinations were represented by two items each. These 64 coping strategies then were categorized into their

theoretical dimensions by 20 graduate students in psychology. Items classified with less than 70% accuracy on any dimension were either modified or dropped, leaving a final pool of 58 items. These items comprise the current form of the Marital Coping Inventory.

Measures:

All participants received a questionnaire packet containing a cover letter, consent form, and a demographics questionnaire. Marital satisfaction was assessed using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976). Individual emotional states was assessed using the Profile of Mood States (POMS)(McNair, Lorr & Doppleman, 1971); the Marital Coping Inventory (MCI), as described above, assessed the process of marital adjustment. In addition, the "L" Scale of the MMPI was used to examine the relationship of social desireability to questionnaire responses.

Results

In order to investigate the structure of the MCI, a principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed. Five factors emerged from this procedure using 48 of the 58 items and accounting for 80.2% of the variance in the scale. Labels for the five factors were based on content analysis of the items, and were described as: "Cognitive Resolution," "Interpersonal Focusing," "Passive Emotional," "Nonconfrontational," and "Distraction." Internal consistency for the first four factors was ≥ 0.87, and

0.44 for the fifth factor. None of the scales were significantly related to social desireability.

All five subscales of the MCI showed a distinct relationship to overall marital adjustment and emotional state. In general, the Passive Emotional strategies were highly related to dysphoric mood and were associated with poor marital adjustment. Conversely, coping strategies that were positively related to dyadic adjustment included cognitive strategies, efforts to resolve the presenting problem, and efforts to alleviate the emotional distress of the stressor.

Discussion

Marital coping, as part of the process of marital adaptation, has been described but inadequately quantified. This study examined coping responses specific to the marital relationship, and described the development of a statistically reliable and valid inventory of these strategies.

The 58 item Marital Coping Inventory is composed of coping strategies were generated both empirically and that fit a theoretical framework of both coping and marital adjustment. Factor analysis yielded five factors which are differentially related to individual emotional state and marital adaptation. These results provide convergent validity for the scale, identifying the MCI as a potentially useful measure for both healthy and dysfunctional couples.

In general, strategies that are passive and cause the individual to focus on the emotional aspects of the stressor were most highly correlated with personal distress, and were related to poor overall marital adjustment. Conversely, cognitive strategies that involve the spouse and that are directed at both the emotional aspects of the stressor and at resolving the problem were correlated with overall marital adjustment.

Further research involving a larger, more diverse sample is needed to further validate these findings. Additionally, a more detailed examination of the individual's cognitive appraisal of the marital stressor may offer useful information as to the cause or rationale behind the coping strategy used. Furthermore, longitudinal research may provide a more clear causal relationship between choice of coping response and personal well-being and marital satisfaction. For example, couples early in their relationship may utilize and benefit from different coping strategies than those used by couples later in their relationship. The Marital Coping Inventory may prove to be a useful clinical and research tool in the study of these and other questions regarding marital adaptation.

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